

An Ancient Stick Insect

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Abstract

This article proposes that a Chinese tree root carving of the fourth to third century BC is based on a stick insect.

Key words

Phasmida, Chinese, Antiquities.

This artifact (Figure 1) is noted today as being the oldest surviving root carving from Ancient China. The head and body of the animal is made of smoothed tree root, while the legs are rendered in bamboo, which clearly show their sectional structure. The entire creature is lacquered maroon red. The head is certainly feline, with large orange (ground) and red (pupil) eyes. Its teeth, in a formidable fence-like array, may be taken in an almost comical manner. The rest of the animal is anything but threatening. The right front leg bears a snake that wriggles up the length of the limb, while on the right hind leg a short snake bites a tailless lizard. The left front leg bears a lizard clutching the head of a (stylized) bird in its jaws, which appears on this drawing, on such a limited scale, as a floral device. The top of the left hind leg bears a small but easily identified cicada.

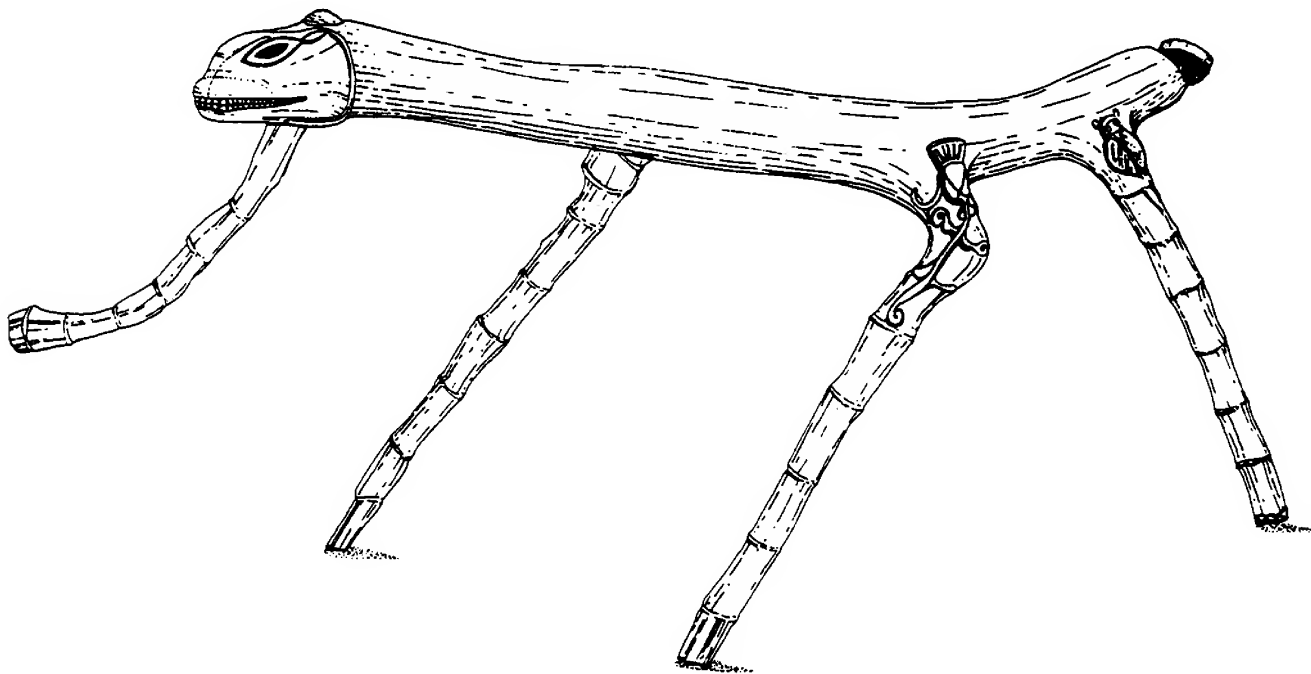


Figure 1. Tree root carving with bamboo and lacquer, height 32cm; length 69.5cm. Eastern Zhou, Warring States Period (4th-3rd century BC), Chu state. Excavated from tomb M1 at Mashan in Jiangling county, Hubei province, and now in the Jingzhou Regional Museum, Hubei province (Beijing, 1985: pl. 43:1; Goepper, 1995: no. 75).

While figures such as dragons, which have a long history in Chinese art, can be interpreted using written sources and parallels with later folklore, the nature and identity of this figure remains elusive, as do the figures that adorn its body. Were these figures common in Chu culture? When dealing with material from this period little can be taken as certain. Not only is there a dearth of textual material to aid in interpretation, but the nature of root

carvings as a group is also obscure, as very few have survived. From its position in the tomb where it was found, above the head of the female occupant, this carving could be seen as a kind of guardian, to "ward off evil" (Rawson, 1996: 143). At this period in Chinese history it is clear that there was a growing interest in "shamanism", and graves contained offerings other than bronze. At the same time the art of the Eastern Zhou is unusually rich, with a variety of motifs and geometric devices. As a result, many pieces were clearly meant to be appreciated on many levels (as this root carving contains a number of figures that are related to a greater or lesser degree). At the same time, using modern art-historical taste as a guide (which, it may be noted, is often quite different from the aesthetics of antiquity), this figure could be the favourite of the owner that shows no more than the mind-set of the occupant.

This creature has been interpreted by modern art historians as an "imaginary beast", although there is compelling evidence to suspect that it is a rendition of a stick insect, a creature that, to many museum curators, would indeed seem imaginary. While there are a number of particular features of this figure that indicate it is composed from a variety of animals, from the feline head to the smaller animals on the legs (it should be noted that there are four legs rather than six in insects), the overall morphology of this animal is clear. It has a very long thin body with long thin legs. In the case of the latter it is interesting to note that one leg is clearly projected forward into space, which is consistent with common behaviour of many phasmid species (as noted below).

The treatment of the head of the animal also deserves special consideration. While it is clear that it is based upon a feline model, one should not then quickly assume that this factors against an insect-inspired origin for the animal as a whole. It should be noted that many phasmid species have a combination of mouthparts and eyes that lead many who are unfamiliar with the habits of this order to conclude that phasmids are capable of inflicting considerable damage, and that, like mantids, they are carnivorous. As in many art objects of antiquity - and today - attention to detail is often sacrificed to capture the perceived qualities of the object of interest. Instead of depicting large compound eyes and complex mouthparts, the artist may have chosen to simplify his subject and portray a more easily conceived form.

It is from this latter point that one may pose the question, why is this root carving not of a mantis? While it is clear that the Chinese - along with many other cultures - have long venerated mantids as animals endowed with special properties due to their unique form, this carving lacks the main attribute of a praying mantis, the raptorial legs. While not venerated in modern societies today, phasmids show many features that may have inspired intrigue. Many phasmids exhibit an immobility reflex when threatened, where the animal projects its limbs forward and remains motionless for periods of time. Many species also have a swaying pattern of motion, while others stop and waft their legs in the air for anchorage if they are placed upon a surface with little opportunity for vertical movement. Also of interest are the many patterns of escape which different species display, from moving backwards to dropping and flying. Is any of this behaviour recorded in the positioning of this root carving? Without further information, this aspect may remain conjectural. However, it is with such behaviour in mind that one can appreciate why a phasmid would be portrayed in antiquity. Once we understand that this creature is a stick-insect, we can also understand why two snakes, two lizards, a bird, and a cicada are associated with this animal. These are all animals that one would expect to find in a phasmid's domain.

References

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